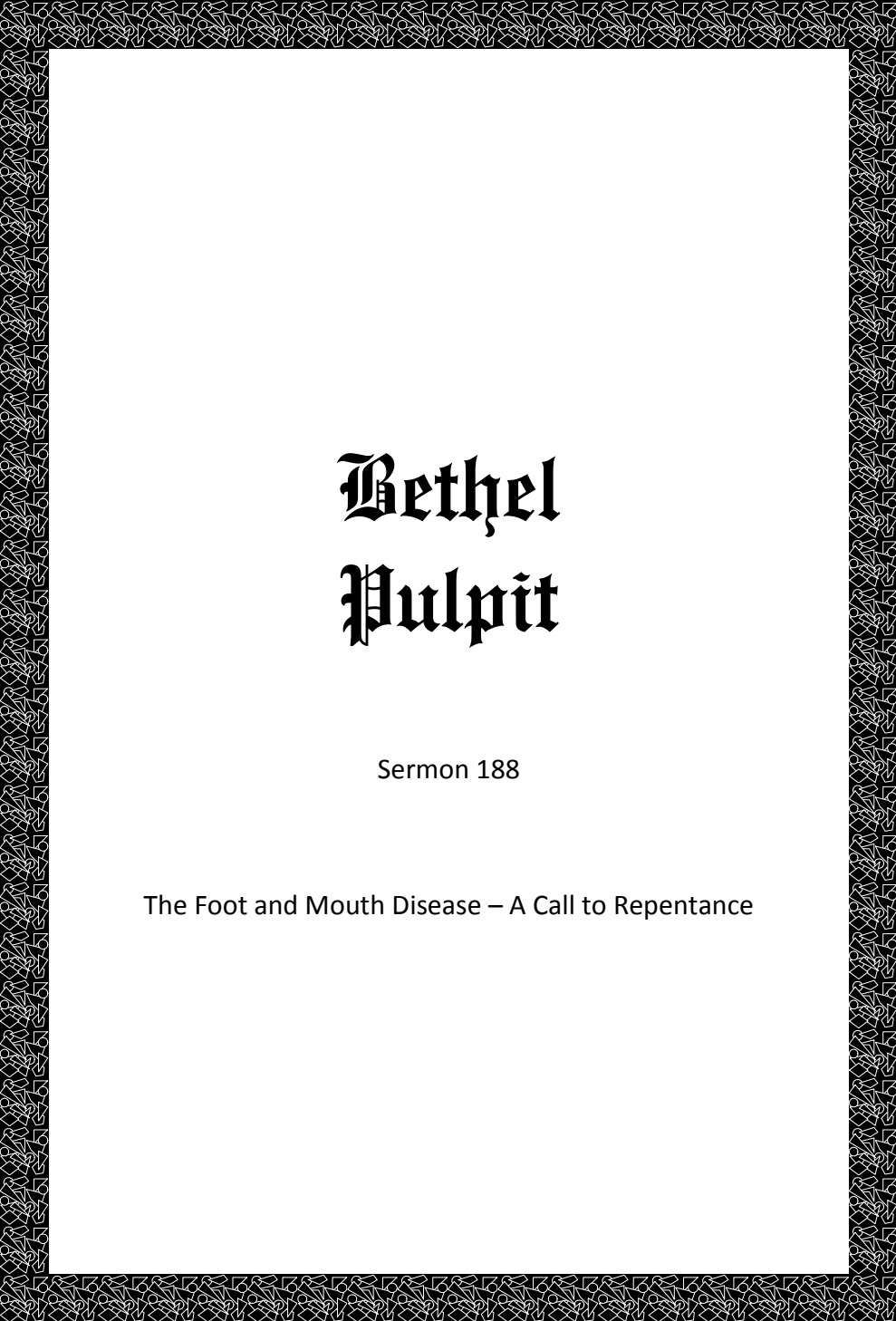




Bethel Pulpit

Sermon 188

The Foot and Mouth Disease – A Call to Repentance

**Sermon preached at Bethel Chapel, Luton,
by Mr. B. A. Ramsbottom,
on Lord's day morning, 25th March, 2001**

Text: *“And in that day did the Lord God of hosts call to weeping, and to mourning, and to baldness, and to girding with sackcloth: and behold joy and gladness, slaying oxen, and killing sheep, eating flesh, and drinking wine: let us eat and drink; for to morrow we shall die” (Isaiah 22. 12, 13).*

The wonderful thing about God's holy Word is that it is never out-of-date. This chapter is so applicable to our country today. The reason why the Word of God is always up-to-date is twofold. First of all, God never changes. He is eternally the same in His justice, His wisdom, His holiness, His majesty. And then, man is still the same. I know you will say there have been so many changes, so many inventions, so many improvements, but essentially man is unchanged in his lost, ruined, sinful condition, his desires. At one time he could only travel by horseback. Now he can go by plane, but he travels for the same purposes, for the same reasons. Men and women, girls and boys, fundamentally have the same things that make them sad today as they did then, the same things that make them glad today as they did then. So the Word of God is always up-to-date, and it is always up-to-date because it *is* the Word of God, and it is “the Word of God, which liveth and abideth for ever.” It is a living Word. It speaks to us. Sometimes it speaks most solemnly; sometimes it speaks most blessedly, most graciously. We are called to hear. We are called to heed. We are called to tremble at the Word of God.

Well, you see, what a picture we have here of England today! This is a time of national calamity, where everything is going wrong. God describes it as “a day of trouble, and of treading down, and of perplexity” (verse 5). Now what a description that is of England today! We have had the dreadful floods and the dreadful disasters and now we have this dreadful cattle disease, the foot and mouth disease. You remember that even Pharaoh's magicians concerning the cattle disease said, “This is the finger of God.” “A day of trouble, and of treading down, and of perplexity.”

There is something in this chapter that strikes a chord. Many people living in Jerusalem had lovely houses, good houses, houses that they spent years preparing, houses that were really nice, and now what

were they having to do? They were having to destroy them, having to pull them down, having to use the stonework and the rubble to help the defences, the walls of the city (verse 10). Lovely houses, they had spent years preparing them; nothing wrong with the houses, yet because of the calamity of the times they are having to be pulled down. Doesn't that remind you of all these healthy cattle and flocks of sheep, some herds having taken years to establish, and now having to be destroyed?

I never have brought politics into the pulpit and I hope I never shall, but at the end of the chapter you have a politician and he is not concerned about the welfare of Jerusalem. His concern is to make a name for himself. He had even hewn out a sepulchre. He was going to be remembered as a famous man even when he died. He would have a wonderful grave. But you have an awfully-solemn word about what the Lord is going to do: "He will surely violently turn and toss thee like a ball into a large country" (verses 15-19). I am not trying to fit this to anyone or anything, but I am just speaking of how this chapter is so up-to-date.

Now the verses I have read to you as a text begin with a solemn word: "The Lord God of hosts." God is almighty. God is in control. Nothing can ever take place by accident or chance. It is very clear according to the Word of God that these disasters only come by divine appointment, by divine permission. Witness for instance the Flood, the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. That is a solemn word and it is a close word, a mysterious word: "Shall there be evil in a city, and the Lord hath not done it?" Not that God in any way can be the author of sin. But, "In that day did the Lord God of hosts." The solemn point is, God is forgotten. It could be said of many people, it could be said of most people, "God is not in all his thoughts." Finally, we have to deal with God and God is almighty. God will always have the last word. God is on the throne.

"In that day did the Lord God of hosts." That means the almighty God. Hosts of angels obey Him. Hosts of devils obey Him. Hosts of circumstances obey Him. "The Lord God of hosts." It is a wonderful mercy when the church of God can feel, "The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge." "In that day did the Lord God of hosts."

We seem to forget that we are living in the last times and there are the signs of the times, these commotions in the earth, these disasters, these calamities. The Puritans and the Scots and I believe the Dutch divines

have an expression, *common grace*. They write very much concerning *common grace*. Now I have mentioned this point before. I do not like the expression, *common grace*, though I believe the doctrine. Let me just say first of all why I do not like the expression and then let me explain the doctrine. I do not like the expression because grace in the Word of God is never common. Grace is very particular. Grace is always very special. That is why I do not like the expression, but the doctrine I believe with all my heart, the doctrine normally spoken of as *common grace*. That is, there is a loving, kind, watchful providence of God over all things, all God's creatures, the whole of His creation, the wicked as well as the righteous, the evil as well as the good. Apart from this, life could just not go on, apart from this (and I use the expression) *common grace*. The Lord opens His hand and satisfies the need of every living creature (Psa. 145. 16). He causes the rain to fall upon the just and upon the unjust (Matt. 5. 45). There is the harvest year by year, according to God's ancient covenant and promise made with Noah, and the wicked partake bountifully of it as the righteous do. This is the doctrine spoken of as *common grace*, and in these last day it seems that the Lord, little by little, is withdrawing this wonderful blessing of common grace. And if so, then we will expect more disasters and expect more calamities.

But the emphasis here is this: "In that day did the Lord God of hosts *call*." There is a *call* in these calamities. In other words, God is speaking in them. These things are God's voice. How few there are amidst all these things who hear God's voice! God is speaking to England. God is speaking to His people. "In that day did the Lord God of hosts call to weeping, and to mourning, and to baldness, and to girding with sackcloth." In other words, repentance. And today the calamities we are suffering are God's solemn call to England to repentance. What nation more favoured than ours, blessed with the holy Word of God, freedom of worship for so long, godly ministers, so much of the blessing of the Lord known in our favoured land? And yet what land departing more from God's ways, God's commandments, God's precepts?

"In that day did the Lord God of hosts call to weeping, and to mourning, and to baldness, and to girding with sackcloth." So there is love in it; there is mercy in it. The worst thing God can ever do with any people, any nation, any church, any person, is to say, Leave him alone. That ends in apostasy, when the Lord says, Leave him alone. But there is hope, there is mercy. "In that day did the Lord God of hosts call to

weeping, and to mourning, and to baldness, and to girding with sackcloth,” these, of course, being the outward marks of repentance. Of course, the people of the east were much more demonstrative than we are in times of grief. You read of people dying, for instance, Jairus’ daughter, and all the weeping and the noise and the wailing and the minstrels. So in ancient times in Israel, when there was sorrow and repentance, there was the weeping and shaving their heads and wearing sackcloth, these outward signs of repentance.

Do not forget, there is such a thing as national repentance as well as personal repentance. God deals with nations. The point is, God only deals with nations in time. There is a personal reckoning with sinners one by one, individually, in the great judgment day to all eternity. But nations, God must deal with in time. So we have scriptures like this: “Righteousness exalteth a nation: but sin is a reproach to any people.” Now what of this solemn call of God to repentance – in the days of Isaiah, in the present day? What about the effect of it? Is it listened to? Is it heard? Is it regarded? “In that day did the Lord God of hosts call to weeping, and to mourning, and to baldness, and to girding with sackcloth.” Now what effect did it have? What was the response? What result was there? “Behold joy and gladness, slaying oxen, and killing sheep, eating flesh, and drinking wine: let us eat and drink; for to morrow we shall die.” That was the response then, and that is the response now.

But there are a lot of things here. First of all, the people did not regard all this calamity in Jerusalem as God’s voice. They did not regard it as a solemn call to repentance. It was just one of those things that were happening – it is a nuisance, and it is sad, but it will pass over. What did they do? “Thou didst look in that day to the armour of the house of the forest” (verse 8). Of course here in Isaiah 22 the danger was not some cattle plague. It was an assault from the enemy who were about to attack the city. What did they do? They did not look to God. They looked in that day to the armour of the house of the forest. They were God’s national, covenant people. They knew what God had done for them. They knew He was on the throne. They knew He was almighty. But they did not *want* to know this. God was not in all their thoughts. They looked at their own wise men, at their ability. They tried to deal with it themselves, and all these things ended in disaster. We do not read that there was any prayer in this. One of the national newspapers this week contained a very short letter. One of you kindly cut it out and sent it to me, just a very short

letter, that there is this terrible national calamity, but has anyone ever thought of a little word: prayer? “Thou didst look in that day to the armour of the house of the forest.” You have not looked unto your Maker. You have not had respect unto Me. That is Jerusalem then. That is England today. This is not regarded as a solemn call from the Lord. It is just something that has happened.

In another letter to one of the national newspapers, I think this last week or the week before, a well-known minister wrote on the lines of the Book of Exodus: “This is the finger of God.” You should have seen the response he got from other letters! This is “Christian” people writing: Do you think a loving, kind, merciful God would cause such things as this? O the perversion of Scripture, that people will not realise this is God’s solemn judgment upon us, God’s voice to us!

“In that day did the Lord God of hosts call to weeping, and to mourning, and to baldness, and to girding with sackcloth: and behold joy and gladness, slaying oxen, and killing sheep, eating flesh, and drinking wine: let us eat and drink; for to morrow we shall die.” Well, one or two principles here. The first is that *people do not want calamities in any way to interfere with their pleasure*. The enemy were at the gate. It was disaster. It was going to be destruction. They had been warned. They knew about it. And God was calling them to weep, to mourn. What did He find? What took place? Just carrying on as before: joy, gladness, slaying oxen, killing sheep, eating flesh, drinking wine. In other words, having a good time. In other words, enjoying pleasure. What about your newspapers this week? There is a complete split, a divide down the middle. Half of the paper describing the awful, terrible, solemn calamity, the cattle plague, the foot and mouth disease affecting our country, increasing day by day, the authorities doing their best but unable to stop it. What about the other half? Well, a great preponderance of sport, and the rest of it, wickedness, sin, pleasure-seeking, crime, murder, adultery. You find those two things going together.

“Behold joy and gladness, slaying oxen, and killing sheep, eating flesh, and drinking wine: let us eat and drink; for to morrow we shall die.” Well, we find that people live as if they are never going to die, and forget that they are going to die, and they put these things out of their thoughts. But here it is more of a fatalistic spirit: if we are going to die we will die, so let us have a good time until that day comes. If they mention, “to morrow we shall die” here, they do not mention it in the light of the

judgment day and a never-ending eternity, in the light of sin and their just desert. It is more a fatalistic spirit. If to morrow we die, and perhaps we shall, and probably we will, let us enjoy ourselves until that day comes. That is the spirit then, and the spirit now, nothing to interfere with pleasure.

There is another principle here which is very, very clear. The Lord called to weeping and mourning. What was the response? Joy and gladness. *There is not the seriousness in our country, there is not the sobriety in our country, there is not the solemnity in our country that there should be.* It has not always been so. Those of us who are old enough to remember the last war, (as a young boy I remember 1940, the announcement, “France has fallen!”) remember the hush that came over our nation, the people wondering if it would be England the next week, if we were going to be invaded; the sad faces you saw, people walking down the streets. There was a kind of fellow-feeling that we were in it together, the old and the young, the rich and the poor, but there was that quietness, that hush, that seriousness. I was only a young boy then, but I have never forgotten the experience of it, that sense of quietness and seriousness and solemnity that swept over our nation. We seem to have lost it now. The only sadness is that people’s pleasures are being interfered with, but the Lord of hosts calls to weeping and solemn repentance.

I want to bring this closer. I do think that this does affect our congregations, and not just concerning the foot and mouth disease, the cattle plague. It is a very sad, solemn day in which we are living, and yet generally speaking, there is not the seriousness and the sobriety and the solemnity. Mind you, I abominate that sanctimoniousness which some people think is godliness. A cheerful person can be very serious. Who was a more lively, cheerful, if you will jovial person than William Gadsby, but who more weighty and serious on the things that matter? Now not just this week and last week and next week does the Lord God of hosts call to weeping and to mourning, but at all times. It would be a wonderful thing to see more of a chastened spirit. Why am I here? What is God’s purpose for my life? I am not here for ever. It may be you young people are thinking of your life before you. You are making your plans. You have your ambitions. You have your thoughts, and rightly so, you should have, and happy thoughts, and happy desires. It is right for you to seek happiness, a nice home and family and a job. But I do not think there is the seriousness there was in a former day, that chastened spirit, a guilty

sinner hastening to the great, burning day. It seems we are living in the last times when God's judgments will be more clearly seen on this earth and when it will be harder for the people of God. You are knowing a struggle that former generations did not know. The world is so wicked. Things that were once counted an abomination are now taken for granted as being right. O that there were more of a serious, sober spirit.

Well, "What wilt Thou have me to do?" "While my days on earth are lengthened, may I give them, Lord, to Thee." "Redeeming the time, because the days are evil." And the great point, if we are born only to die, if we are here but for a little space of time, so may we live knowing that we must die – not "eat, drink, and be merry," "for to morrow we shall die." But what then? When my little stay on earth is ended, when my time here below is finished, what then? The judgment day, the eternal sentence, a vast eternity. You know what we sang this morning: "*Bold* shall I stand in that great day" ("Jesus, Thy blood and righteousness"). Did it make some of you have solemn thoughts like I did in the pulpit? Shall I stand *bold* in the great day before the holy, heart-searching God with all the holy angels with Him, not now despised and rejected of men, but on the throne of His eternal glory and every knee bowing before Him and every tongue confessing that He is the Lord? "Bold shall I stand in that great day"? It will be a solemn day when we await that sentence, whether it will be, Come in for ever, or whether it will be, Depart. And we have not finished our little lives yet. We have not attained yet. We have not reached heaven yet. It will be ten thousand mercies if you and I hear that sentence which millions will never hear, "Come, ye blessed of My Father." For sure I am that none of us deserve it. O but "in that day did the Lord God of hosts call to weeping, and to mourning." Have you ever wept over your sin, confessed your sin, mourned over a dear, dying Redeemer as the sins of His people were laid upon Him? Do these things mean anything to you? "Is it nothing to you, all ye that pass by?"

"In that day did the Lord God of hosts call to weeping ... and behold joy and gladness." But there is a third thing here. There is the first thing, nothing must interfere with pleasure, and the second thing, the lack of soberness and sobriety. And the third thing is *materialism, the things of this life, enjoying things, making money, earthly comforts*. And what of God? And what of Christ? And what of salvation? And what of heaven? And what of hell? "And in that day did the Lord God of hosts call to weeping, and to mourning." He always does. In every sermon the Lord

God of hosts calls to weeping and mourning over our sin and guilt, and to the people of God because of how far short they fall; they are faltering and failing and dishonouring the Lord. Every sermon, but there are these special times like this in our nation when almighty God brings a most awful plague upon us and calls us as a nation and personally and as congregations and as families to weeping and mourning. And what then? “And behold joy and gladness, slaying oxen, and killing sheep, eating flesh, and drinking wine.”

And this is it: “Ye have not looked unto the Maker thereof, neither had respect unto Him” (verse 11). Well, beloved friends, O may our country look to its Maker, have respect for Him. There is not much respect for Him, but may we as a congregation look to our Maker, realise that God is our Maker, God is our Creator, that He is the Lord God of hosts. We are accountable to Him. He is merciful, He is gracious, He is sovereign. He “will by no means clear the guilty.” And O may we be found looking to our Maker in a way of solemn repentance and humble confession of sin and seeking mercy for Jesus’ sake through His precious blood. “Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts: and let him return unto the Lord, and He will have mercy upon him; and to our God, for He will abundantly pardon.”

Now it is this. Just a word in closing: *the Maker*. God is our Maker and He is the only One who can put things right. Let me put it very simply so that perhaps you children can understand me. Here is a clock and it has stopped. The first thing they do is give it a good shake, but it does not go, so they try oiling it, and still it does not go. Then they try cleaning it thoroughly, but it still does not go. Then they see one or two screws are loose and they tighten them, but it still does not go. So they take it to the watchmaker. He says, “There is only one thing. You will have to send it back to the maker. It needs a new inside.” In all its simplicity that is just what you and I need personally and savingly. We have to go back to our Maker and we need a new inside.

Well may the Lord sanctify these very solemn remarks to His glory and to our good. “And in that day did the Lord God of hosts call to weeping, and to mourning, and to baldness, and to girding with sackcloth: and behold joy and gladness, slaying oxen, and killing sheep, eating flesh, and drinking wine: let us eat and drink, for to morrow we shall die.”